

ORIGINAL

U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION**

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determined that the following proposed action is categorically excluded from NEPA documentation requirements consistent with 40 CFR 1508.4, 43 CFR 46.210 and 516 DM 8.5. From 516 DM 8.5 B(2)

"The operation, maintenance, and management of existing facilities and routine recurring management activities and improvements, including renovations and replacements which result in no or only minor changes in the use, and have no or negligible environmental effects on-site or in the vicinity of the site."

Proposed Action:

The Proposed Action is to repair a dirt berm covering four 24" diameter by 20' long underground PVC pipes that act as water storage tanks at Granite Pronghorn Water in San Cristobal valley (See the attached photos). This work will be completed in one day during the August 23 to September 12, 2015 timeframe. Heavy rains in the San Cristobal Valley during a July 18 storm resulted in considerable surface runoff in the vicinity of Granite Pronghorn Water. The dirt berm covering the underground water storage pipes was partially washed away exposing the PVC pipes to sunlight in three distinct areas. Associated UV degradation of the exposed pipe sections is of concern as this will shorten the lifespan of the system if left unchecked. The exposed white PVC pipe also creates a visual impact.

Under this action, the exposed sections of pipe will be stabilized with a concrete dirt mixture poured over a layer of wire mesh (chicken wire and hardware cloth) for structural integrity. Three to four cubic yards of concrete will be necessary to cover the exposed pipe. Sand (up to 36 cubic feet) and gravel (up to 59 cubic feet) will be excavated from a nearby wash at the site using hand tools and mixed with the concrete. A portable concrete mixer will be used to mix the needed cement, sand and gravel to produce up to four yards of concrete. The concrete will then be applied using hand tools. When completed the concrete will be stained and painted in a patchwork to color blend as closely as possible with surrounding desert soils. A layer of soil may also be added on top of the finished concrete as part of the blending effort.

The site will be accessed via helicopter from the end of Charlie Bell Road within the non-wilderness section of Child's Valley. The goal of helicopter transport and the use of a portable mixer is to complete the project (all needed repairs) in a single day, thus limiting the impacts to wilderness to a single day only.

A work crew consisting of up to 10 staff from the refuge and the Arizona Game and Fish Department will drive motorized vehicles to the end of Charlie Bell Road and be ferried by helicopter to and from the work site in four round trips. Materials consisting of up to 18 - 90 lb. bags of Portland cement, a portable concrete mixer and hand tools will also be ferried out to the site in two to three additional round trips.

The Charlie Bell Road in Child's Valley is the closest non-wilderness point that a fuel truck for the helicopter can access the refuge without undue risk of getting stuck. Therefore, the fuel truck will drive to and park at the end of Charlie Bell Road in the non-wilderness area and provide helicopter refueling from that site. The helicopter will land near the fuel truck in the non-wilderness area for refueling.

The *Cabeza Prieta Comprehensive Conservation Plan Wilderness Stewardship Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* ([CCP] 2007) states that the Refuge will "continue to ensure that reliable sources of free water are available in at least 22 locations within the range of the Sonoran pronghorn." Granite Pronghorn Water is one of the 22 water sources identified in the CCP that the refuge intends to monitor and maintain.

No Action:

The Granite Pronghorn Water system is a valuable resource for Sonoran pronghorn survival and recovery as the system has been in place for over 10 years and pronghorn ranging in that part of the refuge regularly use the water as needed. The "No Action" alternative is therefore not acceptable as the refuge has no intention of allowing the system to degrade or ultimately abandoning this system.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated:

1. **Motorized Vehicle Transport:** The use of motorized ground transport was considered and dismissed from further analysis. The Granite Pronghorn Water was originally constructed via helicopter transport because it is located in designated wilderness with no roads or trails that provide access to the site. Currently, there are still no roads or trails with direct access to the Granite Pronghorn Water. Therefore, the use of motorized ground transport is not considered a viable alternative at this point.
2. **Walking From A Public Use Road:** Hiking as a means of accessing the Granite Pronghorn Water is not a viable alternative due to the large amount of supplies and equipment which will be necessary to make the needed repairs to the catchment system. Hiking distances to Granite Pronghorn Water from the nearest point in non-wilderness that can be accessed by motorized vehicles are approximately 16 miles round trip.

Additionally, because this catchment system provides a much needed water supply during the dry summer months and is critical to the Sonoran pronghorn recovery and it is imperative to repair it as quickly as possible; the actual work will take place on one day during the August 23 to September 12, 2015 timeframe. The high daytime temperatures present at this time of year and the amount of materials which will be needed to be transported over a long distance eliminate this alternative from consideration.

3. **Using Stock Animals:** The use of stock animals (i.e. horses and/or mules) in support of management activities in wilderness is generally preferred to the use of motorized vehicles or transport. These may, but not always, provide a lower impact alternative for wilderness management actions. The use of stock animals for a project of this scope and projected load components and weight, would require an experienced outfitter and a large number of animals.

Currently, there are no outfitters or vendors available in the area with the draft stock or equipment that could be readily available for such an operation in time to meet the proposed time frame of late August to early September, 2015. That the project is proposed for late August, 2015 during a typically hot, humid period, the amount of support that draft animals would require considering the distance that they would be required to travel from the nearest suitable non-wilderness staging area (perhaps at least 20 miles) also renders this option unfeasible. This alternative is therefore not included in further analysis.

Determination:

The Proposed Action is the use of helicopter transport and a portable concrete mixer as it is the only viable alternative for accessing the site with the crew and amount of supplies and equipment required to make all necessary repairs and to complete the job in a single day during the hot summer months.

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Categorical Exclusion(s). This project meets Categorical Exclusion requirements per Departmental Manual 516 DM 8.5 B(2) *"The operation, maintenance, and management of existing facilities and routine recurring management activities and improvements, including renovations and replacements which result in no or only minor changes in the use, and have no or negligible environmental effects on-site or in the vicinity of the site."* This action does not have significant impacts on natural resources, unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources or wilderness areas. Nor does it have "highly" uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks as identified in 40 CFR 46.215 or 516 DM 2, Appendix 2.

Permits/Approvals. A Re-initiation of Intra-Service Section 7 consultation on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan resulted in a revision to the Biological Opinion (BO) relating to the status and baseline of the Sonoran pronghorn and Sonoran pronghorn waters on November 21, 2013 (AESO/SE 22410-2006-F-0416-R001). Project work associated with the Granite Pronghorn Water was included within this revision. No other permits or approvals are needed.

Public Involvement/Interagency Coordination. Supporting documents including a NEPA Compliance Checklist and this Environmental Action Statement are posted on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge website (http://www.fws.gov/refuge/cabeza_prieta), at the Ajo Post Office, Ajo Public Library, and at the Pima County Justice Court in Ajo.

Supporting Documents.

Cabeza Prieta Comprehensive Conservation Plan Wilderness Stewardship Plan and Environmental Impact Statement [CCP] 2007

NEPA Compliance Checklist

Photos

Project Leader: 

Date: 8-14-2015

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A: Granite Pronghorn Water as it appeared from above prior to the washout of July 18, 2015

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B: Granite Pronghorn Water as it appears from above following the washout of July 18, 2015